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SUBJECT: BRUNEI'S ONLY POLITICAL PARTY WELCOMES U.S. ELECTION LAW
AND PARTY DEVELOPMENT EXPERT

SUMMARY

1. (SBU) On October 17, 2009, U.S. election law and democratic development consultant, Mr. Robert Dahl, spoke to Brunei's only existing political party, the National Development Party (NDP), on party growth and grassroots organizing. Mr. Dahl's visit was supported by the Embassy as a means of outreach to Brunei's small community of civil society organizations. Mr. Dahl commended NDP's good practices of internal democracy. The challenge for both the NDP and developing civil society remains the mindset that Bruneians who participate in civil society will be incarcerated. Mr. Dahl suggested NDP focus on membership recruitment. As important, NDP must show Bruneians that participation with NDP helps both Brunei and Brunei's Government (GoB). Unfortunately, the GoB hampered the program by attempting to confiscate materials as Mr. Dahl arrived at the airport and the Internal Security Division (ISD) collected all materials related to his presentation. End Summary

LONG ROAD TO BRUNEI

12. (SBU) Embassy Brunei facilitated Mr. Robert Dahl, Election Law and Democratic Development Consultant, of the International Foundation for Election Systems (IFES) presentation, as part of post's Public Diplomacy Speaker Program and in support of post's Mission Strategic Plan (MSP) goals. Originally, in October 2007, Mr. Dahl was scheduled speak to Brunei's two political parties, the National Development Party (NDP) and the then existing Brunei National Solidarity Party (PPKB). However, PPKB was deregistered for failure to submit fiscal report to the Government of Brunei's (GoB). This lead to cancelation of Mr. Dahl's visit and until, recently, post has not been able to support a visit by Mr. Dahl.

13. (SBU) NDP's Deputy President, Malai Hassan, used his event management company Ion-E Communication as a means to streamline the GoB's cumbersome bureaucracy and approval process. Therefore, Dahl's presentation was organized by Ion-E Communications and co-partnered by NDP. Malai Hassan invited various government departments and the University of Brunei Darussalam (UBD) to attend the talk. Approximately fifty NDP members attended, but, unfortunately, no GoB or UBD officials were present. However, the leader of the deregistered PPKB - Dr Abdul Latiff Chuchu, attended.

NDP CHALLENGES

14. (SBU) On Friday, October 16, 2009, Robert Dahl paid a courtesy call on NDP President Mohd Yassin Affendi at the NDP headquarters. He also met NDP's Supreme Council members and Board of Advisors. They explained Brunei's political situation and the problems NDP is facing with local authorities. It was noted that the universal right of freedom of assembly and freedom of press are not always available in Brunei. For example, Brunei's two local daily newspapers - Brunei Times and Borneo Bulletin - are often restricted from providing press coverage of any of NDP's political activities.

¶5. (SBU) Bruneians have the mindset that "political participation will lead to incarceration" which results in the lack of interest in politics among the majority of society, especially Brunei's youths. The fear of joining political party is further intensified by the existing State of Emergency. Why join the political party when Bruneians are living comfortably is a common refrain NDP leaders hear.

¶6. (SBU) NDP is happy that the government has implemented an action plan in addressing the issues raised by NDP on poverty, zakat distribution, and housing. However, the more engage NDP is with GoB government departments the more pressure they received from the Ministry of Home Affairs and Prime Minister's Office. For example, NDP currently has 29 branches located at all four districts - Brunei/Muara, Tutong, Kuala Belait and Temburong - with each branch housing 35 members. However a new regulation stipulates that each branch must now have 50 members, and it is getting more difficult to apply for approval in opening a new branch office.

REACHING OUT TO BRUNEI

¶7. (SBU) On Sunday, October 18, NDP took Mr. Dahl to visit the non-Muslim community of Bisaya. Malai Hassan wanted to expose Mr. Dahl to those residing in Brunei whose voices are often not in the mainstream of Brunei's political thought. Bisaya's residents are deeply affected by the government's policy on the Malaysia - Brunei territorial Limbang claim, which is an area in the Malaysian state of Sarawak that Brunei has long claimed as its own territory. The NDP has made pressing for resolution of the territorial claims to Limbang one of their major party platforms and continues to be concerned the GoB will forgo claims in return for concessions on oil

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producing regions on and off shore.

WHAT IS NDP'S PURPOSE?

¶8. (SBU) Mr. Dahl stated he did not see NDP as an opposition party but a party for engaging people in civic affairs. This is not a challenge to the monarchy. It is clear through NDP's vision and mission that the party has no intention in exercising power within Brunei but provides a connection between government and society. This is where NDP needs to educate the public and engage in advocacy.

NEED FOR MORE MEMBERS

¶10. (SBU) To overcome the membership recruitment problem, Mr. Dahl suggested the heads of the branch parties better communicate the party's ideas with the community, and to continue to show they are patriotic. In addition, it must be demonstrated that the NDP is capable of developing good policy alternatives on a wide range of issues and that NDP's ideas have gained respect and favor within the government. NDP should "help people recognize their involvement is really needed and that the cost of not participating is greater than any costs of participating".

¶11. (SBU) NDP's commitment and capacity to develop and present good policies, according to Mr. Dahl, "is a valuable asset that is not being well-utilized under the present political system. It is not only unfair, it is inefficient for society". Mr Dahl suggested that the theme of NDP's message to Brunei should be based on the party's belief which is 'government process requires transparency, accountability, and true participation by the public'. NDP should demonstrate to Bruneians that their individual help to NDP is important for themselves and for the nation.

COMPLIMENTS TO NDP

¶12. (SBU) Mr. Dahl was impressed by how comprehensive and coordinated NDP organizational structure is, and will use NDP as a model in the next countries where he will work. He also commended NDP's good practice of internal democracy which is a based in grassroots/community support.

FINAL THOUGHTS

¶13. (SBU) In his closing notes, Mr. Dahl said Brunei already has a two-party system; with Brunei's overwhelming dominant ruling party as the caucus- cadre parties (or what might be called elite-based parties) and NPD as the branch-mass (or membership-based) parties. The difference between the political parties in Brunei is about the vitality and openness of the political process.

NDP MEMBERS SPEAK UP

¶14. (SBU) During the Question and Answer session a NDP head of women's bureau, Hajah Saemah, asked, 'Will Brunei have an election?' Mr. Dahl believes it is "absolutely possible that Brunei will have an election one day. NDP is laying the groundwork for a possible election". However, "it is a delicate task" where "people can push too hard, too fast". Malai Hassan asked Mr. Dahl on how to practice democracy. Mr. Dahl answered there is "no magic formula or instant fixes in the problem that NDP is facing" but "it will take creative thinking, courage and incremental efforts". He noted that Brunei does have small elements of democracy including feedback to the Sultan who wants to hear what people think. In addition, NDP's proposed policies are recognized and absorbed by the government which is an accomplishment but not NDP's final goal. Members of NDP's Board of Advisors asked such questions like "how can Brunei practice democracy?" and "what is USG going to do with Brunei's situation?" Mr. Dahl made it clear that he is not representing the USG and that he is not here to tell NDP what to do but to provide them the tools so they can take the next step.

LET'S MAKE THIS JUST LITTLE MORE DIFFICULT

¶14. (SBU) Upon Mr. Dahl's arrival, Brunei's customs officials checked his luggage and attempted to confiscate two of his books on politics. The customs officials said they must confiscate the books because of Brunei's censorship regulation. Although customs officials did not confiscate his books but they made photocopies of both books. In addition, the Embassy was informed that Brunei's Internal Security Department (ISD) sent two of their officers to NDP headquarters to collect all paper-works related to Mr. Dahl's visit.

COMMENT

¶15. (SBU). The main challenges for NDP are to attract the youths to

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get interested in politics as they are the future generation as well as communicate to the Bruneian people how the NDP can help Brunei be a better nation. We are pleased that this long awaited presentation was finally able to be held in Brunei. While there were obstacles, Mr. Dahl's presentation was well received and focused on realistic assessments and possibilities for NDP's development within Brunei's civil and political society.

TODD